

# Research Says Grit Plus Talent Equals Student Success

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When Cedric Jennings was born, the odds were stacked against him. His father was often in jail, and his mother's income barely kept the family fed and housed. They lived in too many places to recall—from short-term rentals, to pull-out couches in relatives' homes, to unheated apartments. Cedric walked home alone from school each day past drug dealers through southeast Washington, D.C., at the height of the city's crack epidemic.

For many children, such circumstances portend unhappy outcomes. Somehow, though, Cedric beat the odds, graduated from high school, and gained acceptance to Brown University, where he graduated with honors on his way to earning graduate degrees from Harvard and the University of Michigan (Oppenheim, 2008). As Ron Suskind (1998) recounts in *A Hope in the Unseen*, a key factor in Cedric's success was his mother, who maintained high expectations for her son. Another equally important factor seemed to emerge from deep within Cedric himself—a quality that helped him shun drugs and violence, disregard classmates mocking his bookishness, and study deep into the night. Researchers have found this quality to be as crucial as cognitive ability to student success.

## Unlocking Grit

As Paul Tough (2012) notes, many educators have begun to believe that improvements in instruction, curriculum, and school environments are simply not enough to raise the achievement of all learners, especially disadvantaged ones. Also necessary is a quality called *grit*, loosely defined as persistence over time to overcome challenges and accomplish big goals (Duckworth, 2013; Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013). Grit comprises a suite of traits and behaviors, including

- Goal-directedness (knowing where to go and how to get there).
- Motivation (having a strong will to achieve identified goals).
- Self-control (avoiding distractions and focusing on the task at hand).
- Positive mind-set (embracing challenge and viewing failure as a learning opportunity).

Researchers have long known that each of these qualities influences student success. But they are still teasing out how the combination of these qualities creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Twenty-five years of research has shown that giving students challenging goals encourages greater effort and persistence than providing moderate, "do-your-best" goals or no goals at all (Locke & Latham, 2006). However, simply setting a high bar is inadequate. Students also need the will to achieve goals (Poropat, 2009); a *growth mind-set*, or the belief that they can become smarter and turn failure into success through their own efforts (Dweck, 2006); and the ability to delay gratification and stay focused on the task at hand—what psychologists call *self-regulation*.

A famous example of the power of self-regulation comes from a follow-up study of preschoolers who participated in Walter Mischel's "marshmallow experiment." Researchers found that those who, as preschoolers, had been able to withstand the temptation of eating a marshmallow for 15 minutes to receive a second one were more successful when they reached high school and also scored 210 points higher on the SAT than those who had caved in to their impulses as youngsters (Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990).

In a follow-up study, researchers at the University of Rochester found that environment plays a crucial role in children's ability to self-regulate. Children were assigned to experimenters who either followed through or failed to on a promised task, such as bringing additional art supplies or stickers to children who were able to wait to use existing crayons or stickers. Following these interactions, researchers recreated the marshmallow experiment and found that the children assigned to the reliable experimenters (those who brought the additional supplies as promised) waited four times longer, an average of 12 versus three minutes, to eat the marshmallow than those assigned to the unreliable experimenters (who returned empty-handed) (Kidd, Palmeri, & Aslin, 2013).

## Helping Students Develop Grit

Current studies suggest several ways educators can help students develop grit. Here are a few.

*Start early.* As we noted in our May 2013 column (Goodwin & Miller, 2013), early childhood programs can develop children's self-regulation abilities through structured play. For example, children as young as 3 or 4 can write and follow play plans that help them develop self-control by learning to focus on the same activity for extended periods of time. Through dramatic play, children also learn to control their impulses by staying in character and adhering to the rules of the drama.

*Teach students how to achieve goals.* Students need to learn how to size up a goal, relate it to their own interests, identify steps for achieving it, and think about how they can overcome difficulties that get in their way (Shechtman et al., 2013). For example, Duckworth and colleagues asked high schoolers to envision the benefits of completing a PSAT practice workbook, to anticipate obstacles that might prevent their completing the workbook, and to develop plans to overcome those obstacles. Students who participated in this exercise completed substantially more of the workbook than did students who did not engage in the exercise (Duckworth, Grant, Loew, Oettingen, & Gollwitzer, 2011).

*Explicitly teach growth mind-sets.* Many relatively easy-to-implement programs have been shown to help students develop a growth mind-set. A randomized control trial study of one such program, an eight-session workshop to help low-achieving 7th graders see intelligence as malleable and not static, found that students in the experimental group raised their grade point averages by three-tenths of a point more than students in the control group did (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). Other research also supports the notion that academic achievement is linked to mind-set; Snipes, Fancsali, and Stoker's (2012) review of the literature, for example, suggests that mind-sets directly "influence students' academic behaviors and strategies, which in turn facilitate academic success" (p. 8).

*Use out-of-school activities to help students learn to persevere and succeed.* A research summary by Diamond and Lee (2011) concluded that the best way to teach self-regulation skills may not be to teach them directly, but rather to have students learn them indirectly through experiences that tap into their passions and interests, help them to develop a sense of pride, and give them "a sense of belonging and social acceptance" (p. 7). Thoughtfully delivered out-of-school activities, such as martial arts, drama, and sports, can help students develop self-discipline and persistence through structured opportunities to challenge themselves, learn through failure, and experience improvement. Perhaps not coincidentally, engagement in such programs has been linked to reduced dropout and substance abuse rates and higher levels of college enrollment (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005).

## Expanding the Toolkit

Students with the grit and tenacity of Cedric Jennings often seem to be outliers, possessing a rare and difficult-to-replicate set of qualities. As a result, some people may think that dwelling on grit smacks of blaming the victims, putting responsibility for students' failure solely at their own feet. A growing body of research, however, suggests that students aren't hard-wired for these qualities. Grit can be developed through an emerging battery of evidence-based techniques, which together give educators a powerful new set of tools to support student success.

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